

Tool Control and Safety: How I Lost My Hair

By Cdr. Bert Ortiz

During my maintenance-officer tour at the Naval Safety Center, I have visited and worked with many Navy and Marine Corps aviation units around the world—both organizational and intermediate levels. Providing safety surveys and culture workshops gives me a unique perspective on positive and negative trends, as well as a feel on how units perceive safety in the work place. I want to share some experiences and thoughts as we enter the New Year.

Before addressing tool control specifically, I need to explain the view I get through our safety surveys—not the online type that some people confuse with my team visits. The command safety assessment (CSA) and maintenance climate assessment survey (MCAS) are online and provide a totally different but nonetheless important feedback to a unit's CO. A safety survey provides the unit with a one-day, objective snapshot of safety posture in a command. These are direct, physical surveys of units that my senior men and women do about 150 times each year.

We cover a unit's operations, maintenance, training, NATOPS, and aeromedical programs, and each area is assessed objectively and directly. I truly believe these surveys help not only the unit's leadership but also the men and women actually fixing stuff. Why do I believe it? Your feedback tells me it's good and effective.

Tool control is a specific area of the survey, and my analysts closely look at it. This issue of *Mech* features various stories on the topic. Some stories are typical, and we read about them regularly. Others are different, like checking in and out hazmat, or counting dummy rounds, as we do tools.

I have my own stories, like the time I had to recall my skipper on his last flight before his change of command. A tool had been lost the previous day, but we could not trace it to a tool box or to a JCN or MSN. We had no idea where it could have been used. The aircraft already was flying when it was reported missing. After an all-hands, thorough search, we stopped everything. A technician found it at home in a dungaree pocket.

During my white-hat days, a long time ago, I found



an open-end wrench stuck in a rib of an aircraft while doing maintenance on flight controls. Because it had been etched, I knew it was from a depot where the aircraft had been reworked. No record of that lost tool was found! I often think about the disastrous effects it could have had if the tool had migrated to the wrong area. That's what the tool-control program

is about. We must know about missing and broken tools to keep them from causing mishaps.

The tool-control program continues to haunt us all. I am amazed at the amount of issues we find in every unit with this seemingly difficult-to-manage program. But what is so difficult? The secret is controlling our tools, and I'll be blunt: You HAVE to lead by example on this one. If you do not inspect your tool box religiously, or lick and stamp the CDI/supervisor's tool inspection and shift inventory, maintainers will develop bad habits. What do I mean by inspecting tools? Don't just see if they are missing; pick them up to make sure nothing is broken. Many controls exist to help you, including inventory sheets and logs. They are integral parts of the program. Don't deviate from accepted practice, or it becomes engrained, and bad behavior develops, or becomes "cultured." "Johnny never checks, so why should I?" Or, "I'm just the new guy and don't want to rock the boat, even though I know to check before and after every job." "I'll just do it when I think it's really important, or just before I leave on liberty." Too often, it's forgotten then, too.

You may laugh, but these scenarios do happen, and you are kidding yourself if you think it doesn't. We see it daily. And the fix really is simple: You must have tight control of these items while working on aircraft or in your spaces. I'd include it as a hazard item and add it to your deliberate ORM list. Make it expected practice. The alternative is wasted time, money and, potentially, lives. ✦

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